The Girl at the Mirror by brodiew

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Summary:

This is a short one shot in which Nancy battles her guilt over Barb's death. It takes place a couple of days after El kills the Demogorgan and vanishes at the end of Season One.

The Girl at the Mirror

Author's Note:

> The title and inspiration is from Norman Rockwell's painting 'Girl at the Mirror'.
>
> The angst is flying hard and fast. Enjoy!

Girl at the Mirror

The basement belonged to the Party. Or, so her nerd brother obnoxiously claimed. Too bad he wasn't here, now, to repel her invasion of his sanctum. Nancy Wheeler wandered, listlessly, around the room taking in the relics of her brother's passions and the core of his social life: D&D manuals and statuettes, the Millennium Falcon, Ghostbusters gizmos, and assorted action figures. There was also popcorn remains and plastic cups that had yet to make it to the garbage. It was all so childish, so silly and immature, so...evident of a boy who had friends, people he cared and about people who cared about him. It was hard to judge when such a statement was rooted in jealousy. She laughed sadly, recognizing that she knew herself well enough not to live in denial. Her brother had friends. He had friends whom had lived through it, when hers had not. Barb's absence was a gaping hole. Steve Harrington or not. Jonathan Byers or not. Now, she was feeling incredibly sorry for herself. El was gone, too. No amount of denial from Mike would change that. He was suffering whether he thought she was alive or dead. The bottom line was that she wasn't here. And, neither was Barb.

As she looked around the room, she caught her reflection in a large, framed mirror that her mother had removed from her room years ago. It leaned stoically against the wall gathering dust. She imagined what the mirror thought of being downgraded from her mother to the posing of a group of preteen boys. She looked at herself from across the room and was surprised at how old and tired she appeared. There was no real reason for her to be shocked. She had been through Hell with Jonathan and Steve and Joyce. No duration of piping hot shower was going to expunge that kind of weariness. She moved from the couch, taking a nearby stool, and setting it in front of the large

mirror. She sat down and leaned forward wanting a closer look at herself. Or, did she? What she saw frightened her and caused shame to rise like a clinched fist around her heart. Her gut suddenly twisted and a wet blanket seemed to rest on heavy on her shoulders. She could not take her eyes from the mirror. She met the desperation and sickness in her own eyes and would not look away. Was this grief? Of course, she missed her friend, her constant companion in the battlefield of high school. But this was more than grief. This was heavier, more insidious, more debilitating. This was shame. This was guilt.

"This...was your...fault," she sobbed, reaching out to point at the girl in the mirror. "You were selfish. You wouldn't listen to her pleas. His attentions were more important; more important than your best friend's life."

"It wasn't like that!" Mirror Nancy replied, defensively.

"It was exactly like that. You promised Barb. You told her you would leave if things got weird or awkward for her. You made her believe you had her back. But what did you do, hmmm? You didn't have her back. You turned you back! You turned your back on her. You told her to 'just go home!'"

"And why didn't she?!" Mirror Nancy cries. "Why didn't she do what I told her to do?"

"Come on, Nancy, you know why. You know why your guts are twisted like a pretzel and you are having trouble breathing. You know why Barb won't leave your mind! You know why she died! She died because she would not leave you in that house with that boy over night. Even after you shooed her away, she was loyal. She stayed close. She knew you would wake up, whether you were ashamed of what you had done or not. She was ready to be there for you, to take you home, to talk you through it. It didn't matter that you had disappointed her, that you had not only broken your promise to leave, but you gave in to Steve Harrington, that you let him have you. She stayed. What do you think was going though her mind while she waited for you? What do you think inspired her to go back outside? What do you think was waiting for her out there? You know what it was. You've seen it. All those teeth. She died in terror and

excruciating pain because you wanted sex."

"No, no, no, no," Mirror Nancy moaned. "It wasn't-"

"Shut up, Nancy! It was exactly like that. But you know what? She wouldn't let it end there. Would she? She wouldn't let you go back to business and usual. She wouldn't let you live in denial. I can give you a pat on the back for going with Jonathan. For crawling into that damn tree when any sane person would have run the other way. Brave, girl. After that, you were galvanized. Vengeance was yours, right? If I'm going to get my friend killed, I sure as heck am going to kill the thing that killed her. At least that way, I can assuage my OVERWHELMING SHAME at throwing her to the wolves. I have to admit you tried your hardest. You set the trap. You even set the thing on fire. You had both your boys at your side. And, poof! The monster up and vanished into flesh singed air. You lived. So did Steve and Jonathan. But someone else had to fight the final battle. That stings too, doesn't it? A 12 year old stranger. Quite a thing, huh? All that weird lab stuff. Mike and the Party hiding a girl in this house under your nose. I know none of that was your fault. Who knew the girl had superpowers? Who knew she would make the sacrifice you should have made to kill the monster? Who knew that your brother, the one you find so cumbersome, would be the one who kept her safe long enough to save all of your lives?"

"I know," Mirror Nancy replied. "I know. I know."

"What do you know, Nancy? I hope you know you killed Barb. Directly or indirectly, you did it!"

Mirror Nancy removed her hand from her face and sat up. She wiped the tears from her eyes. She let out a heavy, shuddering sigh. She raised hr eyes to her other as her face hardened. "Are you done?

Nancy was oddly silent.

"Good," Mirror Nancy said. "You went on and on and you got me pretty good. I do feel guilty. I am sad. I could have made different choices and Barb might be alive. But, let you tell you something very important. I did not kill Barb! And. I won't let you tell me I did. I won't let my life, as out there as it is, be subject to that nonsense. I

will do everything I can to comfort my brother and I will reach out to Barb's parents. As far as Steve and Jonathan, who knows. But, I'll figure it out. The monster is gone. You don't know how thankful I am for that fact. I'm alive. My brother and his friends are alive. It's a good day. I know I won't get rid of you forever, but for now, and as long as I can manage, you are not driving this bus."

Nancy Wheeler rose from the stool and left the mirror alone. She walked up the stairs and up the next flight as well. She knocked on her brother's door. She heard him say 'Go away', but she ignored him and opened it. He was lying on his bed, his head buried in his Star Wars pillow.

"I said go away!" Mike barked at her. He rapidly wiped tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt.

She walked into the room, smiling sadly, but sympathetically. She sat in his desk chair across form his bunk bed. "I don't want to fight, Mike. I just want to talk about it. Can we talk about it?"

His red-rimmed stare was, at first, distrustful. But, it didn't last long. They both sat in silence for a while.

"It's like part of me is missing," Nancy risked. "I miss her so much."

Mike nodded solemnly. "I know exactly how you feel."

Fin.